



Framed for fame:
Our Livermore Valley
Somm Campers
with writer Randy
Caparoso (center) at
Retzlaff Vineyards &
Estate Winery. Aaron
Taylor of Retzlaff is
at far left; Livermore
Valley Winegrowers
Association
Executive Director
Chris Chandler is at
lower left.

California Wine's ONCE AND FUTURE MECCA



OUR **LIVERMORE VALLEY SOMM
CAMP** PLUMBS THE DEPTHS OF
THE AVA AND ITS WINES

by Randy Caparoso / photos by John Curley
additional photos by Randy Caparoso



*The Steven Kent Winery's Ghielmetti Estate
Vineyard, planted by Steven Kent Mirassou
in the late 1990s.*

Livermore Valley's historical significance as a cradle of California wine was a natural starting point emphasized by vintners and growers greeting visiting sommeliers during our Livermore Valley Somm Camp, taking place this past October 9–11, co-sponsored and organized by the Livermore Valley Winegrowers Association.

The other point of emphasis was this salient fact: There are geographic reasons why Livermore Valley was the first place major varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc were planted in California. In his 1948 book *California's Best Wines*, Robert Balzer put it in this fanciful fashion: "If Bacchus has a Mecca in California, it is . . . Livermore."

If Livermore Valley is such a natural environment for classic wine grapes, why did its reputation for top-quality wine slip behind other California wine regions, such as Napa Valley, Sonoma County or Santa Barbara? Scale has a lot to do with it. In its expanded state today, Livermore Valley is home to nearly 4,000 total acres of wine grapes and about 50 winery bonds. Compare that to over 45,000 acres and 400 wineries in Napa Valley, or the 26,000 acres and 200 wineries in Paso Robles.

This is what our participating sommeliers also experienced first-hand: The movement, only within the past 20 years, of plantings within the valley from flatter, gravelly arroyos—marked by the rich yet well-drained soils originally favored by the 19th-century pioneers—to lower-yielding hillside terrains where clay and sandy loams hold even greater potential for the intensely concentrated, acid-driven styles of wine in fashion today.

Day 1

LIVERMORE VALLEY 101 AND HISTORIC SITES

Also in his 1948 book, Balzer quoted a letter penned by Louis Mel, whose wife wrote the original letter of introduction for Charles Wetmore—California's first Viticultural Commissioner and founder of Livermore Valley's Cresta Blanca Winery—to Château d'Yquem's Marquis de Lur Saluces, who graciously furnished the cuttings of Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon and "Muscatel du Bordelais" (aka Muscadelle) that were planted by Wetmore in 1882. Wrote Mel:

Mr. Wetmore kindly gave me some of those original cuttings which I propagated in my El Mocho Vineyard. Mrs. Mel and I visited several beautiful districts and finally decided that both soil and climate of the Livermore Valley more closely resemble those of "la belle France" where we had both passed our younger days. Mrs. Mel, née de Bire, was born there.

Our initial foray into Livermore Valley began in a late afternoon at the Mels' original El Mocho site, which was acquired by Ernest and Herman Wente—the original "Wente Brothers" and sons of Wente Vineyards founder Carl H. Wente—in the 1930s. The old El Mocho Vineyard is now called Louis Mel Vineyard. There we were greeted by fifth-generation winegrower/winemaker Karl D. Wente, who led us into his family's adjoining property, Sachau Vineyard.

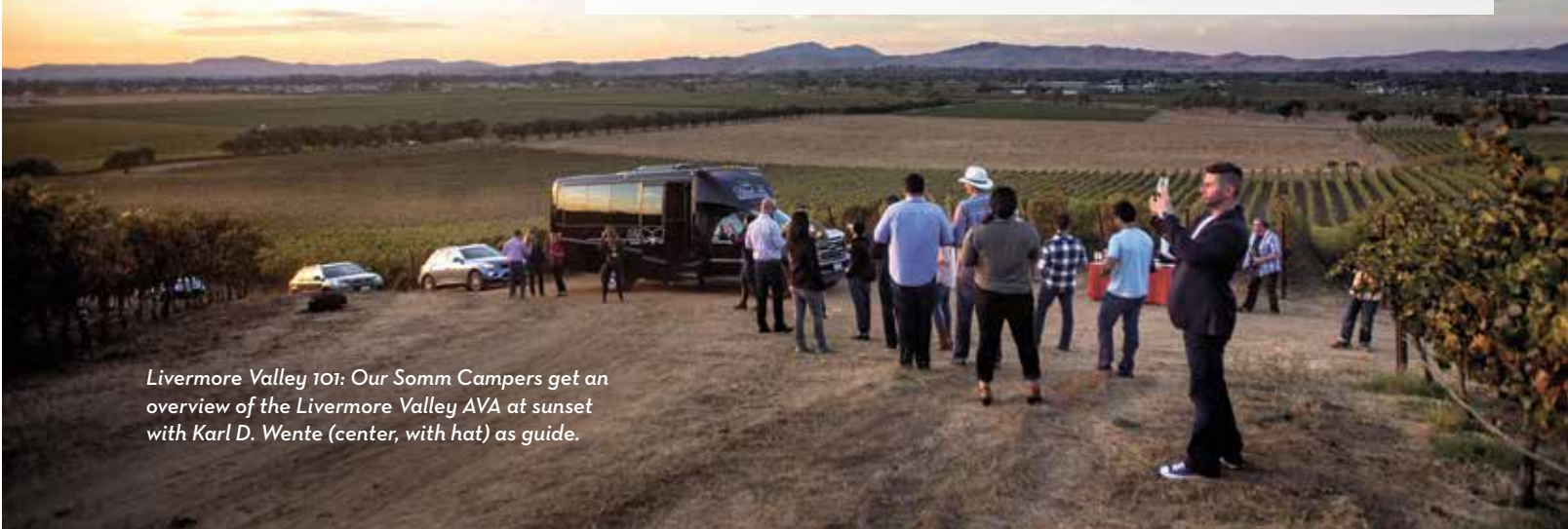
Standing at the top of one of the Sachau Vineyard blocks, at an elevation about 875 feet, Wente delivered a Livermore Valley 101 lesson in history and viticulture: "This is where it all began for Livermore Valley wine. Where you're standing, you get a panoramic view of the alluvial fans and gravelly, coarse sandy soils making up the valley floor; where my family planted their first vineyards in the 1880s—right next to Louis Mel's original property, close to where he built his own gravity-flow winery." The winery is now home to Murrieta's Well, a boutique luxury wine brand and tasting room, which was founded by Philip Wente and Sergio Traverso in 1990.

Pointing towards the sun setting over hills to the west, Wente explained: "Less than 30 miles away is the San Francisco Bay, and just beyond that the Pacific, where currents of cold water flowing down from Alaska into deep ocean canyons create the cold air that is sucked up into these higher elevations, giving us diurnal shifts as much as 35 to 40 degrees [Fahrenheit] during the growing season. This is what contributes to balancing acidity in our grapes and the bright quality of our wines.



Karl D. Wente is Fifth Generation Winegrower at pioneering Livermore Valley winery Wente Vineyards.

Livermore Valley 101: Our Somm Campers get an overview of the Livermore Valley AVA at sunset with Karl D. Wente (center, with hat) as guide.



"This is also why the pioneers chose Livermore Valley. At first, they planted in deep, gravelly soils closer to the arroyos [dry creek beds and washes], whereas over the past 15 to 25 years we have been planting more vineyards on hillsides, characterized by gravelly clay loams. We also source from vineyards as far as 15 miles to the east, at closer to 1,000-foot elevations. Because the valley runs in an east-west direction, with fairly high mountains on both sides, the differences in elevation and wind actually make our east side vineyards, closer to where it narrows at the Altamont Pass, some of our cooler climate sites, even though they're further from the ocean.

"Still, *all* of our sites contribute to the quality of our wines. Take Chardonnay, for instance, which my great-grandfather Ernest Wenté pioneered. Ernest was in the first graduating class at U.C. Davis, in 1911. The next year he persuaded my great-great-grandfather Carl to import cuttings of Chardonnay from the grape vine nursery at University of Montpellier; and during the following 30, 40 years he was the one who made all the selections, cultivating the vines with the most favorable traits, which eventually found their way into vineyards planted by Louis Martini, Stony Hill, Hanzell . . . it's here that California Chardonnay got started." The 1936 Wenté Brothers

"Pinot Chardonnay," in fact, was the first varietal bottling of the grape in the U.S.

Wenté went on to explain how he is now able to take full advantage of the tremendous diversity of vineyard sites and wealth of original clonal material (unparalleled in California) still at their disposal. Says Wenté: "We can pick from among our 500 acres of Chardonnay planted in the Livermore Valley to achieve optimal complexity. We'll pick Chardonnay at 22° Brix, which gives us leaner, lemony qualities of the grape. At 23° Brix we'll get more pear/apple qualities; at 24°, more stone fruit or apricot and at 25° more tropical or pineapple characteristics. Then, depending upon whether we ferment in stainless steel or in barrels, new French oak or neutral barrels, wild yeast or inoculated fermentations and even more variables, we're able to produce Chardonnays here in Livermore Valley that are as interesting as anywhere else in the world."



Dinner at Karl Wenté's home.



Karl Wenté on lead guitar with members of his band, Wolf Hamlin & the Front Porch Drifters, provide entertainment.

Following our sunset pilgrimage in Sachau Vineyard, our sommeliers were treated to a dinner on the front lawn of Karl Wenté's home, looking out at Louis Mel Vineyard—followed by a living-room jam session put on by Wenté (playing lead guitar) and two of the eight members of his band, Wolf Hamlin & the Front Porch Drifters. During our farm-to-fork dinner, Wenté backed up his talk with a pouring of **Wenté Vineyards 2015 Morning Fog Chardonnay**; retailing at just \$15 yet loaded with all the svelte, curvaceous lines, toasty complexity (50/50 barrel/steel fermentation) and varietal intensity of Chardonnays more than twice the price.

With dinner, we were also treated to a seriously sturdy yet rounded **Murrieta's Well 2015 Merlot** (like boysenberry laced with anise and chewing tobacco). We were also impressed by the laudably herbaceous, restrained, meaty textured **Wenté Vineyards 2013 Charles Wetmore Cabernet Sauvignon**, largely sourced from plantings in the gravelly loam between the nearby Arroyo del Valle and Arroyo Mocho and originating from clonal material obtained by Wetmore from the Médoc (particularly Château Margaux) during the 1880s.



Sixth-generation winegrower
Steven Kent Mirassou.

Day 2

EXPLORATION OF EAST LIVERMORE VALLEY AND CALIFORNIA "MOTHER" VINES

First thing in the morning of our first full day, Steven Kent Mirassou picked up where Karl D. Wenté left off on the narrative of how Livermore Valley has gotten its groove back. Mirassou speaks from the perspective of a sixth-generation California winegrower; establishing his Steven Kent Winery in 1996 and his groundbreaking Ghielmetti Estate Vineyard shortly thereafter.

Mirassou told us, "One of the interesting things about Livermore Valley is the misinterpretation that this is a 'hot' wine region, when in fact we are very much coastal, falling in the San Francisco Bay appellation. Closeness to water gives us massive diurnal shifts that help us retain ideal grape acidity.

"You're aware of our history—the region was once home to at least 60 wineries, producing extremely high-quality wines up until Prohibition. We may have lost the marketing battle in the years after; but lately we have been building back up to pre-Prohibition strength. I'll tell you why: We have the soils, the right climate, but maybe more important, we have the know-how and success of previous generations to build on and a collegial culture of sharing that comes with smaller, tight-knit communities."

That culture was driven home after Mirassou's talk, when our sommeliers walked through his Ghielmetti planting, farmed for Mirassou by Wenté

Vineyards and used as a source not just by the Wentes and The Steven Kent Winery but also by much newer, tinier, artisanal producers such Nottingham Cellars/Vasco Urbano Wine Company, Wood Family Vineyards and a half-dozen more.

The following day we also saw Mirassou, his son Aiden and his Assistant Winemaker Craig Ploof sorting and destemming Ghielmetti-grown Clone 30 Cabernet Sauvignon at the Wente winery, which happens to be next door to the Steven Kent tasting room. Cavallo Point Wine Director Jamie Harding remarks, "There seems to be a symbiotic relationship between all the producers in Livermore Valley, big and small." Alluding to the supportive camaraderie between the region's established producers and newbies, Mirassou proffered, "Over the past ten years we have looked to the influx of young winemakers, like [Vasco Urbano's] Collin Cranor to help propel the appellation from a quality standpoint."

Out in the 64-acre Ghielmetti Estate Vineyard—the easternmost, coolest-climate corner of the appellation, by dint of higher-elevation slopes (up to 1,000 feet) and wind velocity increased by its immediate proximity to the Altamont Pass—we tasted several wines that bodaciously fly in the face of Livermore Valley's stock image as a region of one-dimensional, fruit-driven wines. A sampling:

Speck (by Vasco Urbano) 2015 Grenache Rosé, Ghielmetti Vineyard *Tasting lean and taut with a theme of tongue curling Meyer lemon and slaking minerality, as opposed to the soft strawberry fruitiness typical of Grenache-based rosés from most parts of the world.*

Wood Family Vineyards 2014 Grenache *A red wine screaming with cracked peppercorn spice and almost gardenia-like floral notes; medium-full body punctuated by notable acid balance.*

Lola (by The Steven Kent Winery) 2015 Sauvignon Blanc/Semillon, Ghielmetti Vineyard *A 60%/40% blend also dominated by lemon and white flower perfumes plus animale-like murmurings, sharp yet silky in its sleek, steely palate-feel.*

Following our Ghielmetti walk, we gathered together in The Steven Kent Winery's Wine Club room to taste components and bottlings of Mirassou's *pièce de resistance*, the red Bordeaux-inspired Lineage. "Our original impulse was to produce just one wine from the Ghielmetti estate," said Mirassou, "but we found that when the parts are put together you end up with pieces that make beautiful wines standing on their own."

Mirassou describes Lineage, first bottled from the 2007 vintage, as an "exotic beast," alluding to its distinctive expression of Livermore Valley terroir. "In our vineyard,

Cabernet Sauvignon furnishes the skeletal structure, Cabernet Franc a nervous system, Merlot the flesh and Petit Verdot and Malbec the feathers, adding idiosyncrasies to the aromas and structure. As the Cabernet Franc has matured it's retained its persistent acidity, while becoming sexier; a little fleshier—so we've steadily increased its percentage over the years."

Following those remarks, Mirassou had us blind-taste 2014 barrel samples of separate varietal components, not so much so that we could guess what was what (although our sommeliers loved the challenge) but to appreciate the distinctions of the vineyard and appellation rather than varietal expectation. In a comparison of final blends, we experienced the evolution of Lineage and Ghielmetti Estate Vineyard's maturation:

Steven Kent 2012 Lineage *72% Cabernet Sauvignon; deep enormity of black fruit with licorice and scrub; meaty, dense, exquisite polish.*

Steven Kent 2013 Lineage *Just 55% Cabernet Sauvignon with 30% Cabernet Franc; classic cedar notes added to licorice and sculpted meatiness.*

Steven Kent 2014 Lineage *Down to 50% Cabernet Sauvignon with 35% Cabernet Franc and 15% Merlot; has flesh and enormous feel of previous vintages, yet tightened with sharper lines and more fragrant, intriguing personality.*

Inspired by Bordeaux: Collin Cranor ▶ of Nottingham Cellars/Vasco Urbano, owner/wineker Dane Stark of Page Mill Winery and owner/winemaker John Kinney of Occasio Winery.



◀ *The Steven Kent Winery's Assistant Winemaker Craig Ploof noses Lineage, the winery's flagship Bordeaux-style blend. (left) Lola is a steely Sauvignon Blanc/Semillon blend from The Steven Kent Winery.*



◀ Winemaker Mark Clarin and General Manager Heather McGrail conduct a tasting in the McGrail Vineyards cellar.



▲ Three estate offerings from McGrail Vineyards, reflecting three barrel types.

After this, we walked a few feet into Steven Kent Winery's public tasting room to sample other Livermore Valley vintners' Bordeaux-inspired bottlings. Among the highlights:

Nottingham Cellars 2013 Casa de Vinas Micro-Lot Reserve Cabernet Franc *A collaboration of the valley's reputedly most meticulous grower, Casa de Vinas' Julio Covarrubias, and a rising star winemaker, Collin Cranor; flowery with anise, raspberry/cherry and organic notes; lean, crinkly, persistently high-toned.*

Page Mill 2014 Malbec *Strikingly unique, nostril-tingling notes of blackcurrant, pepper-speckled chocolate and lavender-laced potpourri; refreshingly spare, zesty feel.*

Occasio 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon *If you're tired of simple fruitiness in California Cabernet Sauvignon, you'll love this wine's restrained, sinewy, herby/scrubby iteration of the varietal.*

While exposure to contemporary style brands such as Steven Kent and Nottingham/Vasco Urbano might give a visitor the impression that the Livermore Valley style of red wines is largely low-key, our visit to our next stop—McGrail Vineyards & Winery, located towards the eastern end of the valley—dispelled that notion. In fact, it stomps that idea into the ground: Over the past five, six years the McGrails have built a lofty upstart's reputation for powerful, flashy, world-beating Cabernet Sauvignon reminiscent of the heady days of Napa Valley in the late '60s and early '70s, from a vineyard planted only in 1999 (naturally, on the advice of Phil Wente and Steven K. Mirassou).

There's "no big secret," explained McGrail's winemaker Mark Clarin while walking us through the estate vines. "It's mostly location and farming strategy. We limit irrigation, for one, which keeps berry size on the small side, and we end up with all the intensity we need while never

picking higher than 25° Brix"—making an unintended contrast with another famous California region (beginning with N), where optimal Cabernet Sauvignon ripeness rarely comes at sugars lower than 26° or 27°.

The winery's current top-of-the-line—the **McGrail 2013 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon** is rich, muscular and luxuriously textured with high-toned, liqueur-like concentration but without jarring the palate. To illustrate how they build complexity into a compact package, General Manager Heather McGrail and Clarin treated us to an edifying blind tasting of 2014 barrel components demonstrating the sensory qualities of American vs. French vs. Hungarian oak. This was followed by a tasting of finished bottlings from estate-grown fruit, sold only at the winery, reflecting the three barrel types:

McGrail 2013 James Vincent Cabernet Sauvignon (100% French oak) *Vanillin sweetness, sturdy tannin and nutmeg/clove spices of this oak brightening herby notes in the varietal profile, while fleshing out the concentrated feel of McGrail-grown fruit.*

McGrail 2013 Patriot Cabernet Sauvignon (100% American oak) *The even more pungent vanillin sweetness of this oak pushes the varietal herbaceousness front and center, resulting in more front-loaded, cedary sensations on the palate.*

Over the past several years the McGrails have built a lofty upstart's reputation for powerful, flashy, world-beating Cabernet Sauvignon.



McGrail 2013 The Good Life Cabernet Sauvignon (100% Hungarian oak) *Similar to the French oak cuvée in the way it accentuates tannin texturing, while even more brazen in spice notes and a caramelized aromatic imprint.*

Following this barrel experience, we tasted the wines of other winery estates located within McGrail's east side "neighborhood," along or near Greenville Road. Catching our eye:

Wood Family 2015 Para Las Amigas Chardonnay *Crisp feel and citrus/mineral notes driving this sleek, barrel fermented cuvée.*

Bent Creek 2011 Syrah *Bright, plummy varietal fruit, notwithstanding aggressive sweet/smoky oak that many would find compelling.*

Darcie Kent 2014 Field Blend Zinfandel Petite Sirah *Co-ferment pushing the raspberry/cherry side of Zinfandel, buoyed by lip-smacking acidity.*

McGrail 2014 Casa de Vinas Cabernet Sauvignon *In this non-estate single-vineyard bottling, sweet-toned varietal concentration is restrained by a more moderately weighted body, giving a seamless, compact, beautifully-textured feel.*

We concluded our first full day in Livermore Valley with another eye-opening visit to an historic site: Concannon Vineyard's original Mother Vine Vineyard, consisting of head-trained Cabernet Sauvignon growing in the mid-valley's deep gravel bed, from cuttings originally sourced from Château Margaux by founder James Concannon in 1883. Pointing to a modest-sized home right next to the winery, John Concannon told us: "Four generations, as many as ten children at a time, including myself, were raised in that little house."

John Concannon told us, "The significance of these old vines is that my father, Jim Concannon, worked with U.C. Davis in 1965 to plant this three-acre block for a research project. It's from here that Davis developed Cabernet Sauvignon Clone 07, Clone 08 and Clone 11. Out of the 88,000 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon planted in California today, it's been estimated that as much as 80 percent of these vineyards are planted to clones coming from these vines."

"Although this block represents a tiny fraction of our overall production, we'll continue to cultivate it because it represents the values of Concannon Vineyard through



John Concannon at Concannon Vineyard.



Somm Camper Marie Mertz shows off grapes she just harvested from Concannon's Mother Vine Vineyard, planted in 1883 from cuttings from Château Margaux.



Somm Campers try their hand at punch-down at Concannon.



five generations. We like to describe it as "Preserving the past, enjoyed in the future."

Following a hands-on exercise on the use of the refractometer to take sugar readings of grapes in the Mother Vine Vineyard, Concannon led us through a tasting of his **Concannon 2007 Heritage Cabernet Sauvignon** (in the appellation's traditional style, a finely matured, sweetly ripened, round and luscious varietal expression) as well as his **Concannon 2010 Mother Vine Cabernet Sauvignon** (a leaner, more herbaceous and edgier bottling, making it all the more interesting).

The Ellen Rowe Concannon house, dedicated to John Concannon's great-grandmother, who was known as "the entertainer of the valley."



At Cuda Ridge Wines (left to right): Dan Rosenberg, co-founder of Dante Robere; Larry Dino, owner/grower/winemaker, Cuda Ridge; Lanny Replogle, founder/owner of Fenestra Winery; and Brent Amos, winemaker for Las Positas.

Day 3 EXPLORATION OF WEST LIVERMORE VALLEY

In the morning of our final day, our sommeliers were taken on a swing through the west end of Livermore Valley, starting at the boutique-sized Cuda Ridge Wines, where owner/grower/winemaker Larry Dino woke us up with his **Cuda Ridge 2015 Semillon**, sourced from the original Louis Mel Vineyard now cultivated by the Wentes: a refreshingly tart, lemony, spicy, silky dry white, slapping the senses with burnt orange peel sensations.

According to Dino, "While generalizations are always dangerous, the west side is closer to the Bay, and tends to be foggier earlier and longer than the east side. It's a different type of moderated climate where it's more possible, for instance, to grow Pinot Gris and Pinot Noir. The soil types tend to be a finer sandy loam, different from the deep gravel beds you find at Concannon in the mid-valley and less red clay mixed in with the sandy loam found on east side slopes."

Following Dino's introduction, we entered the Cuda Ridge tasting room to sample wines by west side Livermore Valley producers; notably:

Fenestra 2014 Semmonay (73.5% Chardonnay; 24% Semillon; 2.5% Verdelho) *The proprietary name may be, shall we say, creative, but who cares? This is a dynamite blend; silky, creamy textured, and redolent with apple, pear and key lime sensations.*

Las Positas 2011 Coccineous *A fortuitous blend in two ways—visionary owner/growers (Lisa and Lothar Maier) with talented winemaker (Brent Amos, formerly at Fenestra), and an artful weaving of estate-grown Tempranillo (49%), Petite Sirah (36%), Syrah and Malbec, coming across like a basketful of blueberries; lush, luxurious, zesty, sinewy and sensuous.*

Las Positas 2011 Tempranillo *This red awakens the senses to the promising possibilities of Spanish grapes in west side Livermore Valley's moderated Mediterranean terroir; earthy breaths combine with brilliant berry/cherry fruit, finely wrought, bouncy and balanced through a long, lingering finish.*

Cuda Ridge 2014 Cabernet Franc *You gotta shout when Cabernet Franc doesn't taste like limp canned vegetables; this one is the opposite—bright and pure with raspberry notes, firm and meaty in a medium bodied feel.*

Dante Robere 2013 Estate Syrah—*Low-key earthy notes serve to brighten floral, plummy, violet-like perfumes, bolstered by moderate tannin in a fairly full body.*

PHOTO: RANDY CAPAROSO



Our second

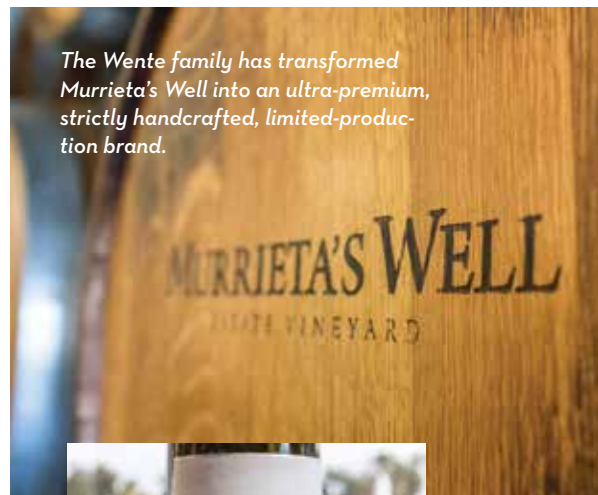
The Cuda Ridge 2015 Semillon is sourced from the original Louis Mel Vineyard now cultivated by the Wentes.

stop was at Murrieta's Well, which the Wenté family has recently transformed into an ultra-premium, strictly handcrafted, limited-production brand, allowing Director of Winemaking Robbie Meyer (whose past credentials include Peter Michael, Lewis Cellars and Jericho Canyon) to pick and choose out of the 500 acres of vineyard surrounding the historic tasting room.

At the bottom level of Louis Mel's original gravity-flow winery (now utilized by Murrieta's Well as a private event room), Meyer told us, "It's great to have access to fruit grown in flats, on hillsides, the more than half-dozen soil variations and wind exposures throughout the Livermore Valley. But not only that, the Wenté team also farms to my specifications, which may be completely different from what Karl Wenté wants."

The result, predictably, is "Wow!" Meyer, as our sommeliers discovered,

The Wenté family has transformed Murrieta's Well into an ultra-premium, strictly handcrafted, limited-production brand.



The Murrieta's Well Small Lot Chardonnay is "Bristling with minerality."

even makes Chardonnay fulfilling once again—his **Murrieta's Well 2014 Small Lot Chardonnay** bristling with as much minerality as citrus, lemon peel and cake spices in notable absence of more typically Californian ripe apple/pineapple fruitiness, with a fine, silken tension on the palate.

The Wentes are also placing their bets on Meyer's mastery of blending,

▼ Campers are challenged by a double-blind tasting in black glasses at the Wente Vineyards Winemakers Studio.

The **Murrieta's Well 2014 The Whip** (Semillon/Chardonnay/Sauvignon Blanc, with smidgens of Orange Muscat, Muscat Canelli and Viognier) is a tropical, flowery, peppery-spiced package with a tart tactile punctuation point, appealing to average consumers' thirst for fruit-driven wines while also meeting newer aficionados' needs for palate-popping acidity.

But it may be with black-skinned grapes—historically, the most conducive to Livermore Valley terroirs—where Meyer really shows his chops, particularly with Petite Sirah, another of the appellation's heritage grapes (Concannon bottled California's first varietal Petite Sirah in 1961). Meyer reasons, "Bordeaux varieties are very symbiotic with each other—it always makes sense to take advantage of that—while Petite Sirah has played a major part in Livermore Valley history, either



Winemaking), crafted in a style harkening back to the days when oak barrels were considered superfluous in Chardonnay, an attitude that may very well be coming back with a vengeance. Explained Wente, "My dad always picked early, usually around 21° Brix, and fermenting without oak gives you the sort of lean, crisp style that makes you want to reach for a plate of oysters on the half-shell." The **Wente Vineyards 2015 Small Lot Eric's Chardonnay** was all that and much more—laudably spare, minerally dry, yet joyously upbeat in its purity of apple/pear/citrus fruit.

Coming out of the fields, we made a fun stop at Wente Vineyards' Winemakers Studio for a demonstration of one of several incredible learning experiences offered by the winery to the public: a double-blind tasting in black glasses, which often makes it difficult for consumers to sort red wines from whites. Of course, not so for our sommeliers: Virtually everyone had no problem identifying a tight, lanky, mild tannin and acid-driven **Wente Vineyards 2014 Small Lot Cabernet Franc** or the full, tropical, flowery turpine-scented **Wente Vineyards 2015 Small Lot Viognier**. Where the black glass challenge became difficult, however, was with the **Wente Vineyards 2014 Small Lot Cunoise**, throwing everyone for a loop, especially considering its generous dose of sweet oak and ripe, jammy qualities contributed by Zinfandel, Petite Sirah and Souzão incorporated in the blend (not that many of us are familiar with 100 percent Cunoises anyway).



"Fermenting without oak gives you the sort of lean, crisp style that makes you want to reach for a plate of oysters on the half-shell," says Karl Wente.



Wente Vineyards Small Lot Cabernet Franc was tight, lanky and acid-driven with mild tannin.



Winemaker Robbie Meyer in the **Murrieta's Well** private event room on the bottom level of the original Louis Mel winery.

as a varietal or key blending component, complimenting everything." Indeed, the **Murrieta's Well 2013 The Spur** (predominantly Petite Sirah and Cabernet Sauvignon with Petit Verdot, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Malbec) rattles the senses with spicy, smoky, red and blue fruit sensations, tight, zesty and sinewy in the mouth.

Our next stop was out in the cool morning sun, in one of Wente Vineyards' heritage Chardonnay blocks, where Karl D. Wente poured us a white named for his father Eric Wente (the family's former Director of

PHOTO: RANDY CAPAROSO



Retzlaff Vineyard Manager Jose Hernandez explains Livermore Valley's similarity to Bordeaux's Graves commune.



"Ripe, jammy fruit expression" from Retzlaff Vineyards.

Our final Somm Camp stop was for a fabulous vineyard lunch and tasting at Retzlaff Vineyards & Estate Winery, a CCOF-certified organic growth established in 1977 by Robert and Gloria Taylor. Their son, Operations Manager Aaron Taylor, told us, "When we started, we were one of just five wineries in Livermore Valley." As a grape supplier and (since 1985) winery, the Taylors' estate has been very much a part of Livermore Valley's "new wave."

Jose Hernandez, Retzlaff's Vineyard Manager for the past 17 years, laughingly told us, "We grow rocks instead of grapes," while walking us over the deep, chunky gravelly beds between rows of 30-plus-year-old Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. This, we discovered, was exactly what Livermore Valley's 19th-century grape pioneers were talking about when citing Bordeaux's Graves commune as a particular inspiration.

Retzlaff's Cabernet Sauvignon block was grafted over in 1979 from own-rooted

Trousseau Gris, aka Chauché Gris or Grey Riesling, which played a historic role (with Chenin Blanc) in one of California's most popular wines of the past, the fabled Wente Brothers "Le Blanc de Blancs." The **Retzlaff 2010 Cabernet Sauvignon** may fall on the lush, rounded, ripe, almost jammy fruit spectrum of the varietal, but is also marked by remarkable and compelling sensations of sweet kitchen herbs (rosemary/thyme). Perhaps even more interesting was the **Retzlaff 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon Rosé**—orangey pink, crisply dry, and fragrant with sagebrush tinged strawberry.

Explained Hernandez, "We shoot for ripe, jammy fruit expression through aggressive leaf removal before veraison—the exposure to sunlight gives us unbelievable consistency of berry size, while minimizing rot issues." In a similar vein as the Cabernet Sauvignon, the round and densely textured **Retzlaff 2010 Livermore Valley Merlot** combines ripe red cherry with pungent



Aaron Taylor, Operations Manager at Retzlaff.

sweet herbs more akin to pennyroyal, while the equally distinctive, well-rounded **Retzlaff 2014 Chardonnay** shines with perfumes of white peach and rising bread dough.

THE LIVERMORE VALLEY SOMM CAMP SOMMELIERS



Marie Mertz
Todo un Poco (Elk Grove, CA)



Greg Bierwirth
Paul Martin's American Grill (Roseville, CA)



Matt Dulle
Single Thread Farm-Restaurant (Healdsburg, CA)



Jerry Garbus
Manhattan Beach Post (Manhattan Beach, CA)



Jamie Harding
Cavallo Point, The Lodge at the Golden Gate (Sausalito, CA)



Chuck Herrold
Ponsaty's (Rancho Santa Fe, CA)



Rafael Hernandez Jr.
The Winery Restaurant & Wine Bar (Newport Beach, CA)



SUMMING UP

In post-Somm Camp remarks contributed by participating sommeliers, Jienna Basaldu of Sacramento's 58 Degrees & Holding Co. expressed a group consensus: "Prior to this I was aware of the longevity of producers like Wente and Concannon, but being there showed how crazy it really is to think of how influential these families have been in the overall growth of California wine and its subsequent standing in the international arena." "Livermore Valley," summarizes Todo un Poco Chef/Owner/Sommelier Marie Mertz, "is an old wine region that feels totally new."

Getting down to brass tacks, Manhattan Beach Post's Jerry Garbus made note of the prevalence of "dancing acidity," "firm minerality" and "cooler climate than expected fruit profiles," yet also the "air of humility" among Livermore Valley producers. Thomas Hill Organics' Lannon Rust found that more than a few of his "favorite wines were the ones where minimal new oak was used, allowing full fruit expression to shine." Above all, Chuck Herrold of Rancho Santa Fe's Ponsat's tells us, "We learned that Livermore Valley wines really do stack up against the best in the world." ❏

Participating Livermore Valley Somm Camp Wineries

Bent Creek Winery
(bentcreekwinery.com)

Cedar Mountain Winery & Port Works
(cedarmountainwinery.com)

Concannon Vineyard
(concannonvineyard.com)

Cuda Ridge Wines
(cudaridgewines.com)

Dante Robere Vineyards
(danterobere.com)

Darcie Kent Vineyards
(darciekentvineyards.com)

Eckert Estate Winery & Artisan Spirits
(artisanspiritsbrandyworks.com)

Fenestra Winery
(fenestrawinery.com)

Las Positas Vineyards
(laspositasvineyards.com)

McGrail Vineyards and Winery
(mcgrailvineyards.com)

Murrieta's Well
(murrietaswell.com)

Nottingham Cellars & Vasco Urbano Wine Company
(nottinghamcellars.com)

Occasio Winery
(occasiowinery.com)

Page Mill Winery
(pagemillwinery.com)

Retzlaff Vineyards & Estate Winery
(retzlaffvineyards.com)

The Steven Kent Winery
(stevenkent.com)

Wente Vineyards
(wentevineyards.com)

Wood Family Vineyards
(woodfamilyvineyards.com)



Josh Hoffman
The Mirage Hotel & Casino (Las Vegas)



Rachel Macalisang
formerly of The Bazaar by José Andrés (Los Angeles, CA)



Susan March, CS, CSW
Ladera Grill (Morgan Hill, CA)



Jienna Basaldu, CS, CSW
58 Degrees & Holding Co. (Sacramento, CA)



Lannon Rust
Thomas Hill Organics (Paso Robles, CA)



Marcus Voglrieder
Nobu Restaurants (Los Angeles, CA)